

Testimony before the Higher Education Subcommittee of Appropriations
February 15, 2023

Good evening, Madam Chairpersons Walker and Osten and members of the Appropriations Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about the pressing need to fully fund the Connecticut State Universities. I have been a professor in the English Department at Southern Connecticut State and a proud member of CSU-AAUP, my faculty union, since 1998. The work is fulfilling, and my colleagues are amazing teachers and scholars with active research agendas and community outreach projects in spite a teaching load twice that of UConn's. But our work has never been harder—or more important.

It is a point of pride among faculty and staff at the CSUs that over 90% of our students are from Connecticut and will stay in Connecticut. Those who finish, stay in Connecticut—not because they don't have options, not because they couldn't go anywhere they wanted to go with their degrees and their drive. They overwhelmingly stay in Connecticut because they want to be close to family, to build lives here, to give back to their own communities. But the students who don't finish—not because they don't have the brain power to succeed in college, but because the expectation that they will bear an increasing portion of the cost creates a death spiral in which their academic, personal, and financial needs increase, while the resources available to support them decrease. When those students can't finish, we all lose.

I would like to illustrate that point by telling you about one of my students.

Julia is, as she will tell you, poor. She has been putting herself through college for years. She is a voracious reader, and a skilled problem-solver who could be using her writing and critical reading skills, her ability to contend with multiple perspectives and ambiguities, and her empathy for others unlike herself—everything that her University education has helped her develop—to deal with the complexities of markets, public policies, or cultural production. But after 4 semesters at Gateway spread across several years and 2 years at Southern and thousands of dollars in loans, she realized the paradox: the actual experience of going to college provides working-class and poor students with daily, direct incentives to not complete college. “If I weren’t constantly scrambling to make rent and keep the lights on,” she told me, “I would be finished with my degree by now, not still stuck in low-wage jobs, not paying rising opportunity costs for part-time tuition.” Julia gave me permission to tell her story. She’s at work—she’s not in school this semester because it Just Got Too Hard. Funding for the Universities, including an expansion of the PACT program to the State Universities, would mean that students like Julia will be able to finish their degrees, to move on to the bigger, better futures in Connecticut they have been working so hard to achieve.

When I went to college at a state school, I could pay tuition, room, and board working summers plus 10 hours a week during the school year. To the vast majority of my students, my story sounds like a fairy tale. Everyone fed and housed and focused on school.

Governor Lamont’s budget for the State Universities is out of touch, based on false assumptions about who our students are and what they need in order to thrive. Our students are amazing in so many ways, but it’s not fair to expect daily miracles from them to keep their heads above water.

Every dollar invested in the Connecticut State Universities is an investment in workforce development. Every dollar invested in the CSUs is an investment in racial and economic justice. Every dollar invested in the CSUs is an investment in Connecticut's Universities of Opportunity.

Thank you for your attention.

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